

Japan: The unexpected win for Satoko Kishimoto - A mini-evolution in Tokyo

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Satoko Kishimoto was elected mayor of Sugunami last June - the district's first-ever female leader, fighting Japan's sexist attitudes.



Satoko Kishimoto returned to her native Japan in April 2022. She was 47, and for 22 of those years, she had been in Europe, most of them spent working for the progressive think-tank Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. She had no firm plans for the future—maybe doing some writing, maybe engaging in care work. In any case, when she landed, she had absolutely no inkling that in two months' time, she would be mayor of Sugunami, the seventh largest of Tokyo's 23 central wards, with a population of over 588,300.

The miracle

"I did not know Sugunami at all," she told me as I interviewed her on June 13. "And I had no experience in local politics." It had been three years since I last saw her at a Transnational Institute meeting in Amsterdam. Then she was in a typical activist outfit, in jeans and a turtleneck sweater, sharing her insights on democratic ownership of public services. Now she was in a lovely pale blue dress, and carefully tended hair, looking very much the female executive, but when she spoke, she was the same old enthusiastic Satoko expounding on the necessity for more democracy in delivering public services. Except this time, the voters had put her in a position of being in a position to do something about it.

Her triumph in the 2022 elections was only partly a "miracle." Much of it was due to a sense of where the voters were issue-wise, smart coalition-building, and plain hard work in turning out the voters. After she was convinced to run by activist friends, most of them women, her campaign was able to build a diverse coalition of feminist organizations, environmental groups, labor, socialists, and even the Japanese Communist Party. Here, her European experience was useful, with its examples of "united left" formations in countries like Germany and at the European Union level.

Two campaigns

The mayor running for reelection had a controversial record, his tenure being marked by many controversies connected with road-building and the restructuring of community center projects.

Satoko realized, however, that running against his record would not be enough. Her campaign knew that the result would hinge on voter turnout, and bringing voters out rested to a great extent on the platform she was running on. Concretely, she campaigned on improving access to after-school child care, crafting policies for affordable rent of housing, and opening up more opportunities for women.

But equally as important as the concrete promises was the image of her that her campaign was able to communicate: a fresh, young face, a person not tied to the old top-down hierarchical politics, committed to participatory democratic politics, and open to looking for solutions to old and new challenges that the old policies could no longer address, such as the Tokyo's growing gender gap when it came to power, income, and plain old respect.

Satoko garnered some 70,000 votes, just 187 more than the incumbent. Had a far-right-wing candidate who gathered 20,000 votes not run, most of his votes would have gone to the incumbent. The establishment was in a state of shock and anger, she recounted, "but that's democracy." Turnout was indeed key to her victory, rising from 35 to 40 per cent of eligible voters, which was impressive, though Satoko said her campaign's target had been to raise the turnout by 10 per cent.

Hardly had she assumed office as one of only two women mayors in Tokyo's 23 wards when Satoko and her crew immediately plunged into the next challenge: working to have progressive candidates win the Sugunami Council elections scheduled for April 2023. "I really campaigned hard, knowing turnout would determine if I would have the numbers to push my policies in the Council," she said. Turnout in Sugunami rose from 39.4 to 43.6 per cent of eligible voters. The turnout among women voters was one per cent higher than that for men, 44.23 to 43.02 per cent. Sugunami was one of only four municipalities in Japan (out of 1718), which saw 50 per cent or more of those who voted to be women.



Author Walden Bello with new Mayor, Satoko Kishimoto, in her office

A changed landscape

The April election results changed the landscape of local politics. 12 city councilors lost, many of them conservatives. 15 new faces won, most of them women. With a woman mayor and women being a majority of those who won in the elections, people said Sugunami had experienced a "gender revolution." For Satoko, the elections had delivered a council "I could work with" in the effort to push through her vision and policies. Some one-third of the Council's members were people she could count on to support her, another one-third were middle forces who could go with her or the opposition depending on the issue, and the rest were solid oppositionists or, in the words of her key political adviser, Shoko Uchida, "people determined to give her a hard time."

The city council, however, is only one actor. Another key actor, perhaps even more decisive, is the local bureaucracy, which numbers some 6,000. While bureaucracy is often identified with inertia, Satoko says the situation is more complicated in reality. Much of that inertia is just due to a lack of economic incentives. 40 per cent of Sugunami's public workers do not have permanent status, and 87 per cent of these casual workers are women. Then there's also the culture of simply doing things in

a routine fashion. Satoko feels that there are opportunities here for creating fresh motivation among the public sector workers by fighting for more job security for them and bringing them to participate in planning and decision-making.

Satoko gave as an example of the possibility of developing a good working relationship with the bureaucracy her experience in discussing with them the implementation of the “People’s Manifesto” that she had campaigned on. The typical bureaucratic response would have been that Suginami was already locked into a five-year plan imposed from above, from which deviation would be difficult. However, a group of high-ranking bureaucrats came to her, with the items in her People’s Manifesto broken down into four categories. “A was what we could do immediately. B was what we could do with some adjustments in two years. C was difficult without a bigger budget; thus, we needed to plan from 2024 on.” D was what Suginami was already doing. A creative relationship with the bureaucracy, she said, would allow for enlarging the B and C list.

Satoko is convinced that many in the bureaucracy are open to the challenge she has posed: “The old approach is no longer working. What is your solution? Shouldn’t we at least give alternative approaches a try?”

Suginami is like the rest of Tokyo and Japan. The old approaches to old and new problems are no longer working. Part of the solution lies in innovative social and economic policies. Part in crafting new methodologies. Part of bringing into active participation in policymaking more women and other marginalized sectors. But this should not be seen as a panacea since groups identifying themselves as “reformist” have also been recruiting women to shake up a sclerotic system dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party with more extreme neoliberal solutions. Of particular concern to Satoko and her political aide Shoko is the rise of the Nippon Ishin no Kai, which has become the third biggest opposition party in the country, with a program that combines traditionally progressive advocacies like decentralization and gay marriage with neoliberal economic policies, eliminating defence spending limits, and junking Article 9 of the constitution that commits Japan to an anti-war foreign policy.

With a Council she can work with, Satoko feels the agenda she has set out for herself for the next three years is attainable.

The next three years

Greatly improving the delivery of child care and care for care workers is central to Satoko’s vision of a “care economy” for Suginami, as is opening up more opportunities for women in both the public and private sectors.

Also, a priority is the “recovery of the public sector.” This will involve not only fighting for more job security for public sector workers and fostering more active citizen participation in formulating policies. It will also mean an innovative public housing program that would include subsidies for renters as well as support for homeowners with plans such as the renovation of housing units so as to reduce electricity and gas bills. Decarbonizing the local economy is another key objective, which would mean finding ways to reduce the CO₂ emissions of Suginami’s transportation infrastructure and encourage cycling.

Then there is improving the local economy’s finances. Japan’s public debt is now over 264 per cent of gross domestic product, and a great part of it is subsidizing local governments like Suginami. The situation is not sustainable. “You have to get the debt under control, but how you reduce expenditures while improving services is the challenge,” Satoko says.

Coming up with the answers will not be easy, but to Satoko, formulating viable solutions will mean abandoning the old top-down technocratic process and involving active participation from the people. “There is no alternative,” she remarks, borrowing Margaret Thatcher’s celebrated saying but giving it a progressive twist.

At the end of the interview, Satoko escorts me to the exit on the ground floor, where she introduces me to some of the new female council members whom she’s meeting after me. They’re all relatively young. This gives me a shot of optimism.

From local to higher office?

As we part, I ask Satoko whether she now plans to stay in Japan for the long term. “Of course, my future is here,” she answers. My other question is whether she has plans to run for higher office. “None at the moment, I’m focusing on this job right now,” she says. It’s the answer I expected. Progressives like Satoko should, of course, aspire for higher office. They’re needed there. But the way there is often by doing a good job at the local level since, as the saying goes, all politics is local.

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